SAY IT UNTIL IT STICKS
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Psalm 91:1–6, 14–16
Luke 15:1–10

"He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms."
Isaiah 40:11

"Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."
Luke 15:6

If I wanted to come to terms with God it had to be on God's terms,
the chief one being that I would have to give up my ridiculous notion
that I would be accepted by God if I had what it took to be a very "proper type."
What I needed to do was let God accept me with no consideration
of whether I was acceptable or unacceptable.
And then, when I had done that, to quit stewing about it and just rest in the fact
that I was accepted by God, no strings attached.
Odd that it should have taken me so long to get the point.

Lewis B. Smedes
My God and I: A Spiritual Memoir

Ten years ago last February, Chicago police, on a drug investigation, discovered nineteen children, without an adult present, living in a two-room apartment. It was the most unsettling, disturbing incidence of child neglect and abuse you could imagine. The conditions in the two room apartment were squalid beyond description: the stench of soiled diapers, rotting food, mounds of filthy clothes, clogged toilet. One little boy was trying to create a semblance of order by moving the rubble with a broken shovel.

It was a decade ago, but I was never able to forget those children and never stopped wondering whatever became of them. And so I was delighted one day last February, on the tenth anniversary of the event, to retrieve the morning paper, sit down with the first cup of coffee of the day, and see in the middle of the front page a picture of three beautiful children in blue caps and gowns, graduating from elementary school in Kankakee county,

the handsome boy in the middle, Anthony Melton, one of the nineteen neglected children discovered by the police ten years before.

It's not often these days that the news on the front page of the paper brings tears to my eyes. The follow-up story told about five of the nineteen, brothers, who had been taken in by Claudine Christian who lives in Hopkins Park. DCFS officials were concerned about keeping the brothers together while their mother served a jail term—each had a different father, none of whom were in the picture at all—so Claudine Christian agreed to take the five for three months. That was ten years ago.

When they arrived, ages two, five, six, eight, and nine, in her neat bungalow in rural Hopkins Park, the boys didn't know what mealtime was and were accustomed to foraging for food, didn't know about utensils and ate with their fingers. Claudine Christian purchased new bunk beds for them, but they wouldn't get in them, instead slept on the floor, in a huddle, covered by a blanket. The boys fought, destroyed household items. Claudine Christian's husband, already unhappy, gave her a choice: the boys or him. She chose the boys.

She set some boundaries, assigned simple chores, set expectations. The boys started to go to school. There were plenty of challenges and setbacks. Claudine Christian persisted. She took the boys to her church. One by one they were baptized.

The academic and behavioral challenges continue, but the boys are making it, participating in extracurricular activities, singing in the choir; several are junior deacons at church.

At the end of the remarkable account, Claudine Christian recalled those first harrowing weeks when the five little boys slept together in the center of their bedroom floor, despite the new bunk beds, in a jumbled pile of bodies under a comforter. Sleep was fitful, broken by nightmares.

She remembers, "They would wake up in the middle of the night, and I would run into the room and I would gather two or three at a time and just hold them and rock them until they could sleep again. I would say, 'I love you, I love you, I love you.' *Just say it until it sticks.* You can't play with these words when it comes to the hearts of children."

Just say it until it sticks.

One day, 2,000 years ago, a young man talked about God in terms of the tenacious, strong, amazing love that occasionally graces and blesses human life. It was not common then or now to talk about God in these terms. God as creator, God as law giver, God as law enforcer, God as punisher, God as

the random power coursing through the universe—those are terms everyone understands. The young man, Jesus of Nazareth, however, reached deeply into the history of his people to remind them of their own unique alternative way of talking about God.

> "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," a palmist wrote. "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures."

And when their ancestors were held in captivity in Babylon, exiles, miles from their home, a prophet spoke words of comfort and assurance. The people were convinced that their suffering was the Holy One's punishment for their sins. The prophet spoke,

> He will feed his flock like a shepherd: he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom.

The situation was this: Jesus, a young rabbi from Nazareth, was associating with people no self-respecting, religiously observant person would be seen with: sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes. Religious officials were grumbling. Religious people are always the first to grumble about a love that has room for sinners, a love that reaches out to include the excluded.

So they grumbled, and he heard it, and he told a series of little stories to teach them a new God concept, but also as a subtle way to convince them to quit grumbling and fussing about who God is letting into the kingdom and to start enjoying the gift of the Good Shepherd's love. That's an issue, by the way, very much at the heart of the life of his church 2,000 years later.

The stories are familiar and unforgettable. One of the old Sunday School pictures that hung on the wall of thousands of Sunday School class rooms, a picture that I loved as a child and have never forgotten, is of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, with a lamb in his strong arms, striding ahead of a flock of sheep. Another is of Jesus with a lamb on his shoulders. Another is of the shepherd, leaning precariously over a steep and ominous precipice, reaching down to rescue a lamb caught in a scraggly bush.

I loved those pictures. I suppose every child feels lost at some time or another. Those pictures communicated gospel to me.

A shepherd, Jesus said, had one hundred sheep. One strayed and became lost. The shepherd left the ninety-nine—in the wilderness—to go find and retrieve the one lost sheep. "Which of you," Jesus asked rhetorically, "would not do the same?" The answer is "none of us." No sensible, prudent shepherd would endanger the owner's investment by risking 99 percent to recover 1 percent. So the story contradicts common sense.

The shepherd finds the lost sheep, lays it on his shoulder, rejoices, calls friends and neighbors to a celebration. “Wouldn’t you do the same?” Jesus asks, and again the answer is no. Obviously a party for neighbors and friends—food, drink, bar bill, caterer—is going to cost a lot more than the value of that one sheep.

There’s a funny economics operating here. The shepherd is unlike any shepherd anyone knows and places a higher value on one individual sheep than is practical or pragmatic.

The story is told for the benefit of good, responsible religious people. Its obvious beneficiaries are the lost sheep, the outsiders, those who have strayed but have not strayed from the searching, compassionate love of the shepherd. The real object of the stories, I believe—the tax collectors and sinners were already enjoying Jesus’ company, were having a great time eating and drinking with him—the real objects were those religious types who simply could not understand how someone who claimed to be who he claimed to be could associate, accept, approve of, and, apparently, love people like them.

The human tendency has always been to constrict God and God’s love, to fashion a God who acts the way we act, a God who gets upset about all sorts of things human beings do and frowns a lot and punishes the wrongdoers. Most of us, Anne Lamott says, envision God as a stern high school principal, riffling through our files and not liking at all what he’s finding.

One of the most dramatic of those images comes from Jonathan Edwards, a brilliant preacher and leader in the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century. Edwards was an important theologian, but unfortunately what he is most remembered for is a famous sermon he preached once, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” in which he drew a vivid picture of a sinner dangling, like a spider, over the roaring fires of hell. No wonder they called it a Great Awakening.

Good friend Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Seminary, in her recent convocation address, was thinking of that terrifying image when she said,

> Presbyterian Reformed Christian faith is fundamentally grounded in grace and gratitude. It is about God’s freely and unconditionally given love for the world (in Jesus Christ). We don’t deserve God’s love. We can’t earn it. All we can do is receive it with grateful hearts and respond to it with generous lives. This means Christian faith is never about fear—fear that we are “sinners in the hands of an angry God.” We are sinners but the hands are those of a loving parent.

“Yes, but . . . yes, but”—I can hear it now, the grumbling. Sooner or later, when confronted by God’s amazing grace, we sound just like those religious types who grumbled about Jesus. Yes, but—what about people who don’t believe? People who don’t care? People who do terrible things? Are you saying that it doesn’t matter how we live? That everybody gets in ultimately? Are you a universalist?

Stop worrying about it, Jesus said. Let God worry about who gets in. It’s none of your business ultimately. What is your business is living joyful and genuine lives of gratitude in the knowledge of God’s unconditional love for you.

Think about the implications of Jesus’ innocent little story, the incredible premium put on the life of that one individual sheep. Think of what that means in terms of a Christian ethic or the mission of the Christian church.

Douglas John Hall, distinguished theologian, writes, “God would go so far as this to find the lost sheep. . . . The creature is so significant, so wondrous a being, that its creator will go to such lengths to reclaim it.” Hall talks about “the astonishing grandeur of the human creature” (*The Cross in Our Context*, p. 93).

We know, I think, the disastrous results when human value is denied, when human beings are demeaned and humiliated. Rabbi Harold Kushner asks, “What happens to the child who is never fussed over, whose birthdays are ignored, who goes to school in crowded classrooms, and whose teachers are too overwhelmed to learn his name?” (*The Lord is My Shepherd*, p. 137). I think we know the answer.

For forty years this church has tried to give programmatic expression to this theology in our Tutoring program. Its purpose is to provide educational support and enrichment to children from neighborhoods near here. But perhaps even more important, it also says to each child, “You are valuable; you are a precious child of God. God has not forgotten you. We’re here to make sure you know that.” There is nothing we do here that is more important than that, and so I do invite and urge your support, your financial support, your prayers. Come to that celebration next Saturday night, and if you have never done it, give a little of you, your self, your time, your gifts, your love, as a tutor.

This gets personal. Even those of us who are privileged, not marginalized, used to being on the inside, even we deal with questions of our value. We live in a culture that assigns value on the basis of income, status, attire, what neighborhood you live in, what university you attended. We live in a culture that assigns value on the basis of youth, health, vigor. All of that can be fairly fragile, as everyone sooner or later learns. The pain of extended

unemployment is not merely financial. Pastors, psychologists know that it hits where we live—at the place in our own soul where we know our worth: "Nobody needs me. I have nothing of value to offer." The pain of aging is not merely chronological. It has to do with worth: "I'm not what I used to be. I can't do what I used to do. I wonder if I'll ever be attractive to anyone again." The pain of isolation is not just loneliness. It is the sense that maybe I really don't matter to anybody and never will. And into that milieu comes an alternate and literally saving word: you are a child of God, a precious child. You may feel lost, but the Good Shepherd has not forgotten you and comes to find and reclaim you and bring you home.

In Tom Long's fine new book *Testimony*, I read recently about a remarkable woman, Mary Ann Bird, who has written a personal memoir, *The Whisper Test*. Mary Ann Bird was born with multiple birth defects: a cleft palate, disfigured face, crooked nose, lopsided feet, and deafness in one ear. As a child, she suffered not only her physical impairments but emotional damage inflicted by other children: "Oh, Mary Ann, what's wrong with your lip?"

Worst of all was the annual hearing test, when the teacher would call each child forward. The child covered one ear, then the other, and the teacher whispered a simple phrase: "The sky is blue," "You have new shoes." Mary Ann could not hear in one ear and did everything possible, including cheating, to minimize attention to her disability. She hated the whisper test.

One year her teacher was Miss Leonard, whom every child loved. The day came for the dreaded hearing test. Mary Ann cupped her ear. Miss Leonard leaned forward. She remembers,

> I waited for those words which God must have put in her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Miss Leonard did not say "the sky is blue" or "you have new shoes." What she whispered was, "I wish you were my little girl." (*Testimony*, pp. 85-86)

Say it until it sticks.

God has, in Jesus Christ, God's Son, the one who comes to find us, claim us, love us, and carry us home.

One great day Jesus said,

> Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

Thanks be to God. Amen.